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Map points way to fresh, home-grown produce

*By Karen Madden
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Rising food costs and recent vegetable recalls have some residents looking for ways to buy from local sources.

A group hopes to encourage that trend.

The Golden Sands Resource, Conservation and Development Council coordinated the first Central Wisconsin Farm Fresh Atlas to help residents locate locally grown food, and another edition is on the way. A current map of Marathon, Wood, Marquette, Portage, Monroe, Juneau and Adams counties indicates where food suppliers are located and what items they sell.

Efforts like creating the atlas give people the opportunity to find the food they're searching for and to support farmers they might not otherwise know are in central Wisconsin, said Samantha Jones, owner of Sheepy Hollow Farm in Auburndale.

Reinke's Down on the Farm in Grand Rapids is one of the 36 food suppliers listed in the atlas. Owner Greg Reinke's mother, Nathalie Reinke, said buying from local sources means people know where the food is grown, how it's grown and that there's little chance for contamination.

"I think the Farm Atlas is very good," she said. "I hope people take a good look at it and at the variety of people trying to stay on the family farm and stay in farming."

The current map was created two years ago with the help of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point School of Health Promotion and Human Development, North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, Family Farm Defenders and Wisconsin Farmer's Union, said Bill Ebert, Golden Sands Resource Conservation and Development Council coordinator.

Ebert currently is working on organizing a new edition of the atlas.

"A plan for an updated map is in the works; however, it's been on hold for a while due to a lack of volunteers," Ebert said.

To produce the map with the limited funding available, Ebert relies on volunteers with experience in graphic arts and skills needed to put together a large publication.

Professor Jasia Steinmetz, of the UWSP School of Health Promotion and Human Development, helped create the first map and will assist with the next one. For students, eating locally grown, fresh food is part of optimal wellness, Steinmetz said.

The atlas opens communication between farmers and consumers and gives community members the chance to send the message that they will support local farmers, Steinmetz said.

Organizers of the atlas are seeking more farmer participation. To be included, farmers must pledge that their businesses are family or cooperatively owned; are committed to reducing the application of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers; are operating their farms in a way that protects and sustains the region's land and water resources; are committed to treating animals with care; and are willing to provide safe and fair working conditions for employees. Items sold on the farms also must be grown or produced locally.

The cost of producing the atlas is covered by \$50 donations from participating farmers, Ebert said.

"They all felt it was money well spent," Ebert said. "There were also donations from various businesses who believe in buying fresh, local, healthy food."